

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26 O.T. 516 (NRSV)

¹I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. ²I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens. ³You said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: ⁴‘I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.’” Selah

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¹⁹Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said: “I have set the crown on one who is mighty, I have exalted one chosen from the people. ²⁰I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him; ²¹my hand shall always remain with him; my arm also shall strengthen him. ²²The enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him. ²³I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him. ²⁴My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him; and in my name his horn shall be exalted. ²⁵I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers. ²⁶He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!’

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26 O.T. Page 516
“Restoring Love”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. O God, Christmas is almost here. It is the most wonderful time of the year. And yet anxiety still threatens to overcome our excitement. While we celebrate Jesus’ birth, we long for Jesus’ return. Oh God, grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour. May your love for us and our love for you be made complete. In Christ’s glorious Name we pray, **Amen.**

Introduction: **Have you ever** waited for a baby to be born? The mixed emotions of that time are hard to put into words. On one hand you feel anxious. When will the time come? Will everything be alright? And if like Mary, you’re a woman expecting your first child, I’ve no doubt you’re more than a little worried about the process of giving birth. **Childbearing is painful.** Why does it have to be that way? Eve might have eaten the forbidden fruit, but you never did. **And why don’t men** have to suffer the pain of giving birth? It’s all so unfair.

But then, on the other hand, you feel excited. For months now there’s been this new life fluttering around inside you. Thus far you’ve experienced this child **mostly through kicks,** and pokes, and punches. **But soon** you’re going to experience this child, your child, face-to-face. **Soon you’ll** hear your baby’s first cry. **Soon you’ll** draw your newborn child to your breast in a tender embrace, and in that moment, all your apprehension, all your anxiety, all your pain will give way to a glorious and inexplicable sense of love. A mother’s love for her child, and the budding love of a child for his or her mother, **is by far our best analogy** for God’s love. A love that knit us together in our mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13).

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Saint Thérèse (Ther-ee-se) **of Lisieux** (Liz-ee-ou), who's religious name was "Thérèse of the Child Jesus of the Holy Face," once said, "**The loveliest masterpiece of the heart of God is the love of a mother.**" The abiding image of Christmas **is the image of Mary and Jesus**, a mother and her child, and that image embodies the fullness of God's love for us.

The Apostle Paul tells us that "**the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed**" (Romans 8:19, NIV). Just as Advent is a time of eager expectation for us, it's also a time of eager expectation for God. **You see Mary's baby** wasn't just her baby, this baby is God's baby too. **This baby is Emmanuel**, God with us, and through this baby all of the creation can experience the fullness of God's love. **That's why on this fourth Sunday of Advent** we lit the candle of "Love." Jesus Christ is the very embodiment of God's love for us, and it's through Jesus that in return we can express our love for God. "**No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends**" (John 15:13, NRSV). Jesus has come and he's coming again. **And Jesus comes "Restoring Love."**

PAUSE

Move I.

The truth is, sometimes our love fails. We know what's expected of us; we know our actions and our attitudes are supposed to be loving and kind, but sometimes they're not. Love slips into neglect, or even outright hatred. **We know** we're supposed to love our children, **we know** we're supposed to love our spouse, we know we're supposed to love our family, **we know** we're supposed to love our neighbor, **we even know** we're supposed to love our enemy, but sometimes **we quit simply don't**. **That son of ours** has wasted one too many opportunities. **That spouse of mine** doesn't really care about me anymore, so I don't care about them. **The only time Uncle Joe** comes around is when he's looking for money. **That neighbor** of mine has let his dog do his business in my yard one time too many. **I think that Muslin Arab guy** who lives on the corner might be part of a sleeper terrorist cell. Of course, I don't have any evidence; they're a sleeper cell!

But then comes the greatest commandment of them all. You know the one. The one that says, "**Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind, soul, and strength.**" (Deuteronomy 6:5, Matthew 27:37, Mark 12:30, and Like 10:27) You agree, you do love God, **after all you're planning** to include worship in your Christmas Eve, **and you never** miss Easter Sunday. That's 2 hours out of a year. What about the other 8,758 hours in a year? Do you ever even think about God then? I'm sorry, **but that sounds** a whole lot more like loving the Lord your God with "**a tiny bit of**" your heart, mind, soul, and strength rather than with all of it.

A great book for a Bible Study group is the "***The Story***" which is billed as "**One Continuous Story of God and His People.**" I suspected most of you remember that the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before they entered the Promised Land, and after that they lived under the under the judges. **As you read through the story**, there are times you feel like you're listening to a broken record. The cycle just keeps repeating.

One moment the people of Israel swear their undying allegiance to the Lord their God, **and the next moment** they're off cheating with another one of the pagan God's of the neighboring nations.

This hot and cold relationship reminds me of a popular song by Taylor Swift, "*We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together*." The lyrics go like this:

I remember when we broke up the first time
 Saying, "This is it, I've had enough,"
 'cause like we hadn't seen each other in a month
 when you said you needed space. (What?)
Then you come around again and say
 "Baby, I miss you and I swear I'm gonna change, trust me."
 Remember how that lasted for a day?
 I say, "I hate you," we break up, you call me, "I love you."

 Ooh, we called it off again last night
 But ooh, this time I'm telling you, I'm telling you

 We are never ever ever getting back together,
You go talk to your friends, talk to my friends, talk to me
But we are never ever, ever, ever, getting back together. Like, ever...

That song captures the fickleness of human love. Sure, Taylor Swift is taking about the immature nature of teenage relationships, but there're times when I wonder if adult relationships are any better. **There are parents** who abuse and abandon their children. **There's elder abuse**. **People cheat** on their spouse. **They abuse** their spouse. **They have children** to one partner after another. It's enough to make anyone swear off relationships altogether.

Yet, we all long for love. We long for someone to care for us, who we can care for in return. But so often loves seems so fleeting. **The line between** love and hate is razor thin. **Yes, the truth is, sometimes our love fails.**

End I.

Move II.

But God's love endures forever. Our love might be fickle. Our love might cycle on and off. But God's love never fails. When our love falls flat, God's love stands firm. **That's the central message** of our Bible Lesson today, again from the Book of Psalms. **In Psalm 89:2 (NRSV)** the psalmist sings, **"I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens."** **Generations have passed** since the people of Israel moved into the Promised Land. When the people became tired of listening to the judges and they became envious of the other nations around them who had kings, God gave them a king. **First Saul** and now David. **David was a great king**, in fact most Jews will argue that David was the greatest king they ever had. But what was important was that David feared God. He was a just and upright king. Now we know that I don't mean David was perfect. David certainly wasn't a sinless man. **After all**, he did have Uriah placed in the front line of the battle so he would be killed so he could take **Uriah's wife, Bathsheba**, as his own. But David was **"a man after God's own heart"** (1 Samuel 13:14). He loved God and in return God promised that a descendant of David would rule from David's throne forever.

David wasn't just the people's king; David was God's chosen successor to Saul. **In Psalm 89:20 (NRSV)** God says, **"I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him."** This is the only verse in the Bible to specifically identified that the oil **Samuel used to anoint David** as king as being **"holy oil."** This was the oil used in the temple to make the furnishing and utensils used in worshiping God "holy." God called David not only to be set apart to be king of Israel, **but to be in the blood line of God's Son**, who would be the king of kings and lord of Lords forever. And of course, it was 28 generations later that **Jesus was born to Mary** in the city of David, Bethlehem. Jesus is the faithful expression of God's love foreseen in Psalm 89 all of those years ago.

Each month when we share in communion, we recited the words of The Great Thanksgiving. There's a line in the litany that reminds us of the nature of the relationship we have with God. The line goes like this, "**When we turned away and our love failed, your love remained steadfast.**" That's the lopsided nature of the relationship. We don't always love God and others as we should, but God always loves us. **Jesus Christ is God's love offering to us.** The fullness of God's love is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ.

Occasionally I'll hear someone complain that we Christians here in America are being persecuted because we **can't lead public prayers** in schools and we **can't display a manger** in the town hall. All I can say is such stuff is a minor irritant compared to what real persecution is like. **Christians aren't** imprisoned and executed here in America, but they are in other parts of the world.

I remember reading a letter by pastor Saeed Abe-dini, who was serving an eight-year prison sentence in Iran for having started a network of house churches. You see, in Iran it's illegal to convert Muslims to Christianity. **Abedini was being held in small cell** with no heat and no glass in the window and he endured beatings and abuse from the guards and other prisoners because they felt he had betrayed Islam, his former religion. **Pastor Abedini** closed that letter by saying he was being kept warm by "*Soaking in the lave-love of Christ.*" I'd never heard Christ's love described using terms like that. **Abedini explained**, "*The same way that the heat from the earth's core melts hard stones in itself and produces lave, the fiery love of God, Jesus Christ, through the Virgin Mary's womb came to earth on Christmas to melt the hard heart of sin and wickedness of the world and removes them from our life.*" That's the lave-love of Christ. **Human love** can grow cold, even hostile. **But God's love—lave-love—endures forever.**

End II.

Move III.

So, Jesus comes restoring love. We have devoted these four Sundays in Advent to preparing ourselves for Christmas. **When most people think** of Christmas, they think of a baby laying in a manger. They think of a very humble beginning for this new life. **They think of angels, and shepherds, and wise men.** All of this is true, but Christmas is so much more than that. Christmas is the time that turned the world inside out and upside down.

What I've been trying my best to do with this Advent Series is to remind you that this baby of Bethlehem has a mission that only God could conceive and bring to fruition. Humanity was and is in a most miserable state. Darwin's survival of the fittest holds sway over the world. **Everyone person does** what seems right in their own eyes. To borrow some words from the history of the people of Israel from the time when judges ruled over them. **“In those days there was no king in Israel. People did whatever they felt like doing”** (Judges 17:6, MSG). Do you wanna do whatever you feel like doing? Nothing is stopping you, but your own conscience. **Go ahead “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!”**

Or do you want a king? Not a human king prone to let his position go to his head. Not a human king who gives into graft and corruption. Not a human king who will keep raising your taxes to fund his own pleasure. **Rather, a righteous king** unlike any the nations of the world have ever had. A king who will be called **“wonderful counselor, Might God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end”** (Isaiah 9:6b-7a, NIV). **In this king** you will find hope. **In this king** you will have peace. **In this king** your joy will overflow. **In this king** you'll experience true love. This Christmas **come to the manger** and worship Christ the newborn king, God's forever love come down at Christmas to stay. **“Love the Lord your God, keep his commands, and serve him with all your heart and soul”** (Joshua 22:5, NIV).

Like lots of people I like to listen to music when I'm exercising on the elliptical at the YMCA (when it's not closed for COVID). I just set the music player on my phone to randomly shuffle through my mp3 collection. I don't have a very large collection, just between 300 and 400 songs, most of which are praise and worship songs. One of those songs that randomly came up not long ago fits with our theme today of "restoring love." The song was "***Love Never Fails***" written by Brandon Heath and his friend Chad Cates back in 2009. Mostly "***Love Never Fails***" ends up played at weddings. **In fact**, once Brandon Heath sang "***Love Never Fails***" at Carrie Underwood's and Mike Fisher's wedding back in 2010. **But this morning** I want you to think of "***Love Never Fails***" as a Christmas song.

**Love is not proud.
Love does not boast.
Love, after all,
matters the most.**

**Love will protect.
Love always hopes.
And love still believes
when you don't.**

**Love will sustain.
Love will provide.
Love will not cease
at the end of time.**

**Love is the river that flows through,
and love never fails you.**

When we turned away and our love failed, God's love remains steadfast. God's love never ever fails. **Loving and being loved** by God is what matters most. **So, Jesus comes, and is coming again, restoring love.**

End III.

Conclusion: “The loveliest masterpiece of the heart of God is the love of a mother.” Mary’s baby wasn’t just her baby, this baby is God’s baby too. **Yet, the truth is, sometimes our love fails.** All too easily love can slip into neglect, or even outright hatred. The line between love and hate is razor thin. **But God’s love endures forever.** When our love falls flat, God’s love stands firm. When human love grows cold; and even hostile, we can always soak in the lava-love of Christ. **So, Jesus comes, and is coming again, restoring love.** Jesus Christ is God’s forever-love come down at Christmas to stay. Love will sustain. Love will provide. Love will not cease, at the end of time. Love, after all, matters the most. Yes, Jesus comes “*Restoring Love.*”

Closing Prayer: Let’s pray. O God we confess that we have not always loved you with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. But when our love failed, your love remained steadfast. Thank you for sending your Son to restore us into a loving relationship with you. Yes, love—your love—is what matters most. **Amen!**

10:30 Closing Hymn: “Love Came Down at Christmas” Red Hymnal No. 242
All Three Verses

Sending Forth: Has your heart grown cold? Has love been fleeting? Then this Christmas, soak in the lava-love of Christ. Go forth, knowing that Jesus is melting the hard heart of sin, and is restoring us into the love of the Father. **And all of God’s people said...Amen!**